

# THE FALL OF SOMOZA:

## ANATOMY OF A REVOLUTION

by

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**O**n 19 July 1979, the Sandinista guerrillas overthrew the Somoza dynasty of Nicaragua, arguably the "most significant political event in Latin America since the Cuban revolution twenty years ago."<sup>1</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Thomas Borge, a leader of the most militant element of the Sandinistas, emerged as the key individual of the new regime. The only surviving member of the original Sandinista movement dating back to the early 1960's and a leader of the current Prolonged Guerrilla War division of that movement, Borge received the position of Minister of the Interior in the post-Somoza government. The position made him a member of the triumvirate of guerrilla leaders controlling the popular army which had replaced the National Guard, and it also placed him at the head of the National Police. In addition, he serves as the chief liaison between the national and municipal governments.<sup>2</sup>

These legal sources of authority are not all that make Borge a key individual in the new regime. The intangible element translating them into real power is his charisma. It is widely believed that Borge, barely five feet tall, is the most popular figure in Nicaragua. Perhaps the only other man equally recognized is Eden Pastora. A Pastora-led assault on the National Palace in August 1978 freed 58 Somoza-held prisoners, including Borge. Subsequently, Borge named Pastora his deputy at the Interior Ministry.<sup>3</sup>

Given these conditions, surrounding countries took little solace in Borge's prediction, recorded earlier in Cuba's *Prensa*

*Latina*, that a guerrilla victory in Nicaragua would provide the basis for a geopolitical Marxist sweep of Central America within a relatively short time. At one point, he speculated that an imminent Sandinista victory would bring in the US Marines to stop the region's geopolitical transformation. The "revolutionary transformation of Central America will change the political geography of the continent," Borge proffered, and thus "upset the correlation of forces in Latin America."<sup>4</sup>

Other Sandinistas made a similar point, arguing that neighboring countries, especially Guatemala and El Salvador, were "under the yoke of Yankee imperialism" and warranted their support in wars of liberation.<sup>5</sup>

Guerrilla leaders from all parts of Latin America and beyond gave direct support to the Sandinista revolution, with some, such as "Commandante Chino" of El Salvador, paying for their efforts with their lives.<sup>6</sup> When Régis Debray, a French intellectual who had been with Che Guevara during his last days in Bolivia, met the press in Nicaragua with Mario Eduardo Firmenich, a leader of the Montoneros from the Argentina-Uruguay guerrilla theater,<sup>7</sup> reporters on the scene recorded the often-spoken parting statement of the revolutionaries to one another: "See you in Guatemala and El Salvador."<sup>8</sup>

**T**his article's purpose is to delineate the reasons behind the phenomenal rise to power of the Sandinistas. It will be shown that three basic ingredients coincided

to consummate the revolution. The first of these lay in the machinations of the 46-year-old Somoza dynasty, which had alienated many of its subjects. The second ingredient was an eclectic and loosely organized revolutionary movement which turned that alienation into active dissent, then harnessed it to the movement's purposes. Interlacing these two ingredients was a third and determining factor: the well-intentioned but tentative policies of the US.

The genesis of the Somoza dynasty stemmed from the intrusion of the US into Nicaraguan domestic affairs in 1909 in order to stabilize the political scene. Three years later, US Marines began an occupation of the country which lasted until 2 January 1933. When President Herbert Hoover withdrew the last Marine contingent, he made the fateful decision to leave Anastasio Somoza Garcia in charge of a Nicaraguan National Guard, an organization which functioned as the combined police and army. That marked the founding of the dynasty.<sup>9</sup>

General Cezar Augusto Sandino immediately rebelled against the dynasty. Failing to defeat the elusive Sandino on the field of battle, General Somoza enticed him to lay down his arms in 1934 and then allegedly had him assassinated. Ironically, Somoza's treachery guaranteed immortality for his victim; the Sandinista guerrillas took their name from that of the fallen general.

In 1936, General Somoza allegedly brought about the assassination of the president of his country, succeeding to the presidency himself a year later. In 1956, it was Somoza's turn to meet death at the hands of an assassin. The dynasty had taken root, however, with the presidency passing first to Anastasio's son, Luis, and after an intervening term to another son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

During the years of dynasty, the Somoza family garnered a substantial portion of Nicaragua's land and other economic enterprises.<sup>10</sup> Some estimates place Anastasio Somoza's fortune at approximately \$500 million. The Somoza riches have stood in stark contrast to the poverty borne by much of his constituency.

Despite the continued misery among the

people of Nicaragua, the US supported the dynasty. The Somozas remained faithful allies. They supported US policy in 1954, helping to forestall possible communist gains in Guatemala. The abortive invasion of Cuba in 1961, the Bay of Pigs debacle, was launched primarily from Nicaragua. In addition, Nicaragua supplied troops to help Lyndon Johnson's Administration prevent what it perceived as an impending communist victory in the Dominican Republic in 1965.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, loyalty to US policy over many years was a key ingredient leading to Anastasio Somoza's political demise when that policy took an abrupt change under President Carter. Pressure on the executive branch had been building in Congress since as early as 1973 to tone down US ties to repressive governments; consequently, seeking to dissociate himself from the pragmatic policies of his immediate predecessors, President Carter made human rights a pillar of his foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> In the process, he reversed traditional US policy which had favored right-wing governments in Latin America over those of the left. Somoza's was only one of the right-wing governments chagrined over President Carter's new approach.

Some understanding of the hesitations which characterized US policy toward Somoza may be gleaned from a summary analysis of the Carter human rights blitz in Latin America. We shall see that the US entered the final stages of negotiation with

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Somoza against a background of isolation from its traditional allies in Latin America, thereby reducing the leverage President Carter could bring to bear in behalf of Somoza's resignation and replacement by a moderate—as opposed to a revolutionary—regime.<sup>13</sup>

One of the first indications of a reversal of US Latin American policy under the Carter Administration occurred in Brazil. An incipient US-Afro-Latin American alliance, anchored by South Africa and Brazil and aimed at checking communist expansion in the South Atlantic, crumbled even before it attained official status. In response to its public berating by President Carter over its human rights policy, Brazil refused further American military aid and broke the special consultative pact with the US which Secretary of State Kissinger had initiated in February 1976.

At the same time, Brazil hinted at a softening of its traditional anticommunist foreign policy. For example, it offered arms to Libya, a Soviet-supported capital of international terrorism, and it made a public commitment to consider the possibility of arms trade with the USSR in accordance with the Peruvian example. Other Latin nations imitating Brazil's drive toward anti-Americanism were Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Chile.<sup>14</sup>

Syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote:

The 'human rights' bloc on Capitol Hill, backed by the new administration's full moral force, has alienated Brazil and other staunch US allies south of the border to a degree not matched even by the 1961 invasion of the Bay of Pigs. . . . The Brazilians believe that the US under Carter has treated its traditional allies more cavalierly than the 'Cuban-led totalitarian left.' The Brazilians could end up leading an anti-American right-of-center bloc in the Western hemisphere . . . further [depleting] the dwindling roster of US allies.<sup>15</sup>

Echoing these views, the *Latin America Political Report* stated that the "relative autonomy Brazil has achieved in recent years might be used as a protective wing for those military regimes who have fallen out with their erstwhile friends in Washington."<sup>16</sup> The same source indicated that while 40 percent of Latin America's arms purchases came from the US in the 1960's, that figure had fallen to 14 percent by the mid-1970's. "Thus, after years of granting funds to help build up Latin America's military, the United States Congress now has almost no leverage with which to influence them."<sup>17</sup>

On 1 July 1978, in spite of President Carter's intervening success in convincing the Senate that the Panama Canal treaties would usher in an era of goodwill throughout Latin America, it was observed by Alan Riding that the Carter Administration's "pressure on human rights . . . has merely widened the political gap between Washington and many of the capitals of the region." Elaborating on the chilled relations that had developed between the US and the 13 Latin American military regimes, Riding noted that enrollment in the US Army's School of the Americas, located in Panama, had dropped from an average of 1700 per year for 1974-76 to 901 for 1977. Without a vigorous recruitment drive by US officers, the expected figure for 1978 would have dropped to 700. It was unusual that no students registered in 1978 from Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, or Uruguay.<sup>18</sup>

The estrangement of El Salvador and Guatemala reduced US influence over governments in the immediate vicinity of Nicaragua:

When Guatemala and El Salvador came under attack by Congress and the State Department for human rights violations in February of 1977, the two military regimes decided to join Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in rejecting U.S. aid.<sup>19</sup>

This loss of US leverage was particularly relevant to President Carter's policy toward Somoza, since both countries were members of the Central American Defense Council. The US and Central American governments

had fashioned this organization during the middle 1960's in order to contain communist subversion in Central America. Thus, the US entered negotiations with Somoza having just alienated the leadership of half the Central American members of the Defense Council.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, US relations with the remaining three Central American countries were strained. Honduras had been chastised by the US over human rights. Costa Rica, the pillar of democracy in Central America, had been involved in a controversy with the US over its detainment of US fishing boats caught in Costa Rican territorial waters.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the government of Panama had disputes with the US over the canal treaty and over alleged Panamanian collusion with Fidel Castro.

**T**he negative impact on America's Nicaraguan policy resulting from its alienation of traditional allies in Latin America was in evidence as late as June 1979, when many of the disaffected right-wing regimes perceived Somoza's replacement by leftist revolutionaries as inevitable. In spite of these fears of "another Cuba," they still joined other Latin American governments in voting down a US proposal that the Organization of American States provide a peacekeeping force to ensure a moderate alternative. The *Latin America Political Report* stated in its issue of 29 June 1979:

Washington's erstwhile friends among the hemisphere's right wing military regimes had been alienated by President Carter's human rights policies, and were no longer sure that the precedent of intervention might not one day be used against them.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier, the communists of Central America had foreseen strategic advantages to their cause in the growing isolation of the US in the hemisphere resulting from the influence of the human rights bloc in Washington. The secretaries general of the Communist Parties of Costa Rica, Panama, and El Salvador described these advantages in the fall of 1978 in *America Latina*, which is published in Moscow and serves as a weather vane of

communist thinking on Latin American issues. They stressed the importance to communists of supporting the American human rights bloc, which they labeled "the progressive forces of the US" and regarded as "one of the Achilles' heels of US imperialism."<sup>23</sup>

The area of the Caribbean and Central America, according to the communist leaders, was "boiling like a volcano"; owing to the adverse situation of the US and its "retreat at the world level," the US had, in their view, but two alternatives: "to smash the revolutionary movement or adapt itself to the new winds that are blowing in the world."<sup>24</sup> The prudent communist strategy, therefore, lay in supporting the efforts of those in the US Government who also saw right-wing regimes as becoming obsolete in the face of the "inevitable" rise to prominence of revolutionary governments of the left, governments which were euphemistically labeled "democratic." The articles in *America Latina* predicted the necessity for President Carter to acquiesce in the replacement of Somoza by a leftist government.<sup>25</sup>

Like the Central American communists, Fidel Castro also sensed a favorable trend. A US defense intelligence report dated 2 May 1979 stated that Castro had determined at least by the fall of 1978 that Central America was ripe for a communist offensive. The report concluded that the Cuban dictator began at that time to use his influence to unite and focus the energies of various communist liberation elements in the region accordingly. Castro emphasized, the report stated, that time was on the side of the communists.<sup>26</sup>

The trends in Central America converged with other aspects of what Edward Gonzalez had labeled the "logic of Cuba's situation," tending to "impel it in the direction of a more activist global policy." Writing in the November-December 1977 issue of *Problems of Communism*, Gonzalez argued that recent events had greatly enhanced the power of the Castro brothers, Fidel and Raul, leaders of Cuba's revolutionary and military elites, respectively, and that the perpetuation of their authority necessitated continued revolutionary activity.<sup>27</sup>

During the fall of 1978, *America Latina* ran an article by Yuri Koroliiov titled "Criticism and Self-Criticism of the Chilean Socialists." The article stressed the view that communism failed under Salvador Allende's regime in Chile largely because of two factors: impatience and lack of control over the police and army.<sup>28</sup> In that connection, it is instructive to recall the point made earlier that one of the most militant leaders of the Sandinistas, Thomas Borge, controls the police and serves on the ruling triumvirate of the army. In addition, it should be recalled that Borge and many of his followers have expressed the belief—like Castro and the Communist Party leaders of Costa Rica, Panama, and El Salvador—that Central America is ripe for a communist revolution.

Adding to the problem of communist opportunism in the face of US alienation from its traditional allies, the Carter Administration was saddled with another difficulty further limiting its search for a moderate alternative to Somoza. In its zealous pursuit of Senate ratification of the Panama Canal treaties, the administration had created a backlash among conservatives on Capitol Hill. Many of these conservatives were in a position to alter the terms of the treaties through their influence over House enabling legislation providing the necessary appropriations to carry out the programs to which the administration and the Senate had already committed the US through ratification of the treaties. Many of these same conservative congressmen were also strongly committed to a pro-Somoza policy in Nicaragua.<sup>29</sup>

Evidence of Somoza's strong hold on the US Congress appeared as late as the summer of 1979. On 18 June, only a month before Somoza fell, *The New York Times* published letters signed by some 130 congressmen and senators beseeching Carter to cling to Somoza rather than desert him and risk "another Cuba." Similarly, several US congressmen signed an "Open letter to the people of Nicaragua," criticizing US policy.<sup>30</sup>

Such then is the background against which one should analyze the specifics of the US role in the Nicaraguan revolution.

Estrangement between the US and its allies in the hemisphere, the concomitant growing boldness and influence of "progressive" forces both within the hemisphere and abroad, and the vocal concern of aroused conservatives on Capitol Hill—all contributed to an understandable hesitancy in US policy during the critical phase of the Nicaraguan crisis from January 1978 until the Sandinista victory on 19 July 1979. An example of this indecisiveness was President Carter's unwillingness to call publicly for Somoza's resignation until less than a month before that victory. Indeed, the President's reluctance to make such a public demand was a pivotal factor during the critical stage of the revolution.

**T**he countdown to revolution actually began on 23 December 1972 when a severe earthquake shook not only Nicaragua's land and people but also the foundation of the Somoza dynasty.<sup>31</sup> That foundation weakened even as the dynasty seemed to reach expanded dimensions of power. With Somoza in charge of reconstruction, Managua was rebuilt on Somoza land, by Somoza construction companies, with international aid funneled through Somoza banks. It was the thoroughness of Somoza's involvement in and profit from reconstruction which alienated large sectors of both the middle and upper classes while goading much of Nicaragua's lower class into a wave of strikes, demonstrations, and land seizures in 1972 and 1973.

The moderate opposition coalesced under the leadership of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the anti-Somoza newspaper, *La Prensa*. In 1974, Chamorro was able to amalgamate seven opposition political parties and two labor confederations into the *Unión Democrática de Liberación*. In that same year, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) made its first major move toward becoming the focal point of radical opposition to Somoza.

On 27 December 1974, 25 FSLN guerrillas attacked a Christmas party in Managua,

capturing 12 hostages which they exchanged for 14 political prisoners, one million dollars in ransom, and safe passage to Cuba. This daring raid brought the FSLN national recognition but provoked a successful counterattack by the National Guard.

Upon declaring a state of siege, creating an elite counterinsurgency force within the National Guard, and obtaining an 80-percent increase in US military aid, Somoza initiated a reign of terror in the FSLN's northern strongholds. The guerrillas succumbed to a version of the strategic hamlet policy, as guardsmen uprooted 80 percent of the rural population and herded them into resettlement camps. The countryside then became a free-fire zone.

Though militarily successful, the campaign further alienated Nicaragua's moderates, as exemplified in the pastoral letter of January 1977 from the country's Catholic bishops. The letter accused the National Guard of "humiliating and inhuman treatment ranging from torture and rape to summary execution." Similar reports came from Amnesty International and the US State Department.<sup>32</sup>

Thus did the Nicaraguan situation present itself to the newly installed Carter Administration. Almost immediately, the new administration made Somoza's regime the initial target of its human rights policy, restricting both military and economic aid to Nicaragua in April 1977. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Stanford Professor Richard Fagen expressed the belief that the new administration made Somoza a test case of human rights precisely because it believed Nicaragua and Latin America in general to be a safe area, presenting little security risk to US interests.<sup>33</sup>

Emboldened by the American Government's actions, however, the supposedly defunct FSLN launched a series of small-scale attacks on National Guard garrisons in five cities in October 1977. Though easily repelled, the attacks shattered the myth of Somoza's invincibility. Even so, as later noted by William Leogrande, "As 1978 began, the FSLN had neither the political nor the military strength to offer a serious challenge to the Somoza regime."<sup>34</sup>

It was at that time, however, that Joaquin Chamorro again became news. On 10 January 1978, Chamorro, the most influential moderate among the Nicaraguan opponents of Somoza, was assassinated. Mystery and controversy still surround his death. Some believe Somoza himself ordered the murder. Others, however, point out that Chamorro inadvertently served a purpose for Somoza, giving credibility to the Nicaraguan executive's claim of upholding democracy and freedom of the press. Those expressing the latter view claim Chamorro advocated a moderate, as opposed to a violent solution to Nicaragua's political crisis.<sup>35</sup>

At any rate, the assassination was followed by a wave of violence. President Carter's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Viron Vaky, observed that the assassination, "more than any other single factor, catalyzed opposition to Somoza's regime."<sup>36</sup> It also brought President Carter his first real opportunity to pressure Somoza out of office, as public calls for Somoza's resignation sounded across the Nicaraguan political spectrum.

**T**he best chance to dispose of Somoza presented itself almost literally at President Carter's feet. Alfonso Robelo Callejas, a moderate industrialist who currently occupies a seat on the five-member provisional junta, journeyed to Washington in an effort to secure the American President's backing for an alternative government.<sup>37</sup> In retrospect, this was not only President Carter's best, but his last opportunity to secure a truly moderate government as replacement for Somoza.

The President, however, failed to demand publicly that Somoza resign. Nor did he take other measures at that time, such as serious economic or military reprisals, which would have forced the issue. Instead, his response to the situation was to berate Somoza for violating human rights and to wait for the new elections in Nicaragua in 1981, when Somoza would supposedly step down.

The American President's actions proved just enough to ensure a polarization of the Nicaraguan body politic: the real centers of

power in that country radiated to those who were radically pro-Somoza on the right and those radically opposed to him on the left. In the process, moderates lost what little leverage they had as a cohesive and viable force.

Somoza responded to President Carter's chastising by purging the National Guard, the mainstay of his family's dynasty. The gradual demoralization which this action engendered in the guard, when added to the weakening of the moderate opposition, resulted in a further accumulation of power among elements of the extreme left anchored by the Sandinistas.<sup>38</sup>

The Sandinistas comprised three distinct branches, and although opinions differed over tactical questions, the three remained united throughout in their goal: the destruction of the Somoza regime and the National Guard. The names of the three branches suggest their differences in strategy. The Prolonged Guerrilla War division of Thomas Borge stressed a strategy of rural attrition. Another unit, the Proletarian Tendency, concentrated on urban guerrilla tactics. The third branch called itself the Terceristas, indicating its third position between the other two. It was the Terceristas who insisted on recruiting more of the estranged moderates opposed to Somoza, thus giving the Sandinistas the coloration of a broad-based alliance.<sup>39</sup>

On 22 August 1978, the world took notice of the Sandinistas. Eden Pastora, calling himself Commandante Zero, led the attack on the National Palace which resulted in the release of 58 political prisoners, including Thomas Borge. After obtaining free passage from the country, the guerrillas made their way to Cuba. At about the same time, as mentioned earlier, Castro began seriously to consider Central America ripe for revolution.

The growing strength of the guerrillas coincided with further weaknesses in the US bargaining position. In late July, before the dramatic stroke by Commandante Zero, a letter President Carter had written earlier but had not delivered to Somoza was leaked to the press. Responsibility for the leak allegedly lay with apologists for Somoza in the US

State Department. Since the letter praised the Nicaraguan executive for allowing the Human Rights Commission of the OAS to visit his country, those favoring a pro-Somoza policy apparently believed the letter would enhance Somoza's image. However, the human rights bloc of the State Department reportedly had acted to prevent the mailing of the letter in the first place, believing that boosting Somoza's stock ran counter to the interests of the US. Whatever the merits of the allegations, the public airing of the letter increased the appearance of disorientation and lack of cohesion in the Carter Administration. In the wake of US hesitancy, the Sandinistas gained a propaganda victory, portraying President Carter as one who sanctioned Somoza's violation of human rights.<sup>40</sup>

The appearance of confusion in the administration deepened in the aftermath of strikes and uprisings in Nicaragua in September 1978 when the US again failed to call publicly for Somoza's ouster. One factor reinforcing President Carter's tendency to temporize at this time was the overt support for Somoza evidenced by the government of El Salvador, which reportedly sent troops to Nicaragua to fight the guerrillas. Moral support for Somoza came from Honduras, Guatemala, and even Costa Rica.<sup>41</sup>

Though the Costa Rican Government vacillated throughout in its position on the Nicaraguan question, it broke relations with Somoza in November 1978 after his National Guard violated Costa Rican territory in "hot pursuit" of guerrillas.<sup>42</sup> This action by Costa Rica reduced the leverage the US could bring to bear toward a moderate solution of the deepening crisis. In spite of a concentrated mediation effort by the US, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala from 6 October 1978 until 18 January 1979, no satisfactory solution was found.<sup>43</sup>

A further negative factor at this point was the change in attitude of Alfonso Robelo, the Nicaraguan industrialist who earlier had argued in Washington that President Carter should force Somoza's

resignation. By the fall of 1978, Robelo had become too disillusioned with US policy to seriously engage in US-sponsored mediation efforts. As a consequence, there remained no moderate on the national scene with sufficient popularity to pose a democratic alternative to Somoza on the one hand or the Sandinistas on the other.

A loose coalition of moderates, including Robelo, did exist under the banner of the Broad Opposition Front. Outside of Robelo, however, none of its members commanded sufficient respect to head a new government. Yet, it was with this coalition that the mediating team had to negotiate. The ambivalence of Robelo was only one problem faced by the US; another arose when a subgroup known as The Twelve left the coalition in protest over US dominance of the mediating team.

Most prominent among The Twelve was Sergio Ramirez Mercado, a young writer. In the summer of 1979 he would become the recognized leader of a five-member revolutionary junta representing the victorious Sandinistas.<sup>44</sup> The other members of that junta—Robelo among them—were also unenthusiastic about negotiations with the US in the fall of 1978. One, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, was a leader of the Terceristas engaged in guerrilla war against Somoza. Another was Moises Hassan Morales. In the fall of 1978, this son of an anti-Israeli refugee from the Gaza Strip was likewise more intent on opposing than accommodating both Somoza and the US. The fifth person who would share power on the junta was Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, wife of the assassinated editor. To the extent that President Carter was perceived as shoring up Somoza, the man allegedly responsible for the death of her husband, she too could have been expected to be unenthusiastic about negotiating with the US.

In the fall of 1978, then, the individuals who would subsequently comprise the leadership of the new revolutionary government ranged from somewhat less than lukewarm to hostile toward US-sponsored negotiating efforts. Nor was Somoza malleable to US persuasion at that time. The

Nicaraguan executive, sure of substantial support in the US Congress and perceiving clearly the lack of a viable moderate alternative to his rule, could afford to refuse the terms of the mediation team—that is, as long as his National Guard remained a credible force.

The mediation from October 1978 until January 1979 passed through three phases. The first saw a proposal for a 32-member State Council which would call for general elections. In the second phase, Somoza countered with a proposal of his own: a limited plebiscite to test the strength of the various moderate parties opposed to his own Liberal Party. Somoza promised to sprinkle a new cabinet with those found most popular.

In opposition to the Somoza proposal the Broad Opposition Front, after much vacillation, finally opened the third phase of the negotiations by agreeing to a more comprehensive plebiscite looking toward a completely new regime. The Front's exorbitant demands on Somoza, however, doomed the proposal. Somoza would have to free all political prisoners, make certain concessions on press freedoms, leave the country during the elections, and accept OAS supervision of the elections.<sup>45</sup> He refused.

In response to Somoza's refusal, President Carter recalled more than half of the official US representation in Nicaragua. He also formally terminated the remaining military aid suspended since September 1978,<sup>46</sup> but he still refused to call publicly for Somoza's resignation; as a result, US policy once more served merely to weaken the National Guard while strengthening the hand of the far left in Nicaragua.

**W**ith the failure of the mediation effort, the issue was drawn, and a decisive confrontation became inevitable. And so it came. In late May 1979, the guerrillas shifted from a strategy of attrition to one of confronting the National Guard directly.<sup>47</sup> With the guerrillas steadily gaining territory and international support—Mexico had broken relations with Somoza in May and others would soon follow—the US finally



called formally for an OAS meeting on the Nicaraguan issue. Meeting on 21 June in Washington, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance called for a cease-fire and, among other things, for the OAS to form a peacekeeping force which would enter Nicaragua and enforce a moderate solution.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, the US still refused to publicly chastise Somoza by name in connection with a demand for his resignation. It was only after the unanimous rejection of its plan for an OAS force that the US supported a successful resolution publicly demanding that Somoza resign. In this latter proposal, only Paraguay refused to join in the chorus against Somoza.

Having countered the proposed OAS force, with its precedent of intervention against right-wing regimes under pressure from the US human rights bloc, Latin America had finally united on the issue of Somoza's resignation. Consequently, the US renewed its efforts to salvage some sort of moderate alternative to Somoza. In the meantime, however, another development had aggravated the problems faced by the US. On 17 June, the Sandinistas had officially recognized the five-member junta which would represent them in a provisional government; the members of that junta were unwilling to accept a US proposal that they share power with a countervailing junta of more moderate coloration. Gradually succumbing to reality, the US reduced its demand first to four new members, then to two, and finally to none.<sup>49</sup>

After this setback, the US sought at least to salvage Somoza's National Guard. Expressing its fear of "another Cuba" if the National Guard were destroyed, the US mustered an agreement with Somoza and the provisional junta whereby Somoza would leave the country, provided that the National Guard was not dismantled. On 18 July, *The Washington Post* reported that President Carter had refused to involve himself directly in the matter of Somoza's resignation. The White House instead directed a telephone call from Somoza to the State Department, where Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher accepted it. It was then left to Secretary of State Vance to forward a letter

bluntly declaring to Somoza that his departure was essential to end the war in Nicaragua. Accordingly, Somoza left for Miami on 17 July.

The mechanics of the agreement itself doomed the National Guard, however. Its predicament was typified in the following public lament by a junior officer: "We were deceived into thinking that, as soon as Somoza left, the US was going to help us win the war. Only this morning did we realize our officers had gone."<sup>50</sup>

Then came the final debacle. The leader of Nicaragua's Chamber of Deputies, Francisco Urcuyo Maleaños, remained in charge of the transition government. His mandate was to gradually hand over power to the provisional junta. No sooner did Somoza leave the country, however, than Urcuyo announced his intention to remain in power until the expiration of Somoza's legal term as president—in 1981!<sup>51</sup>

Urcuyo's recalcitrance proved to be the final excuse for Thomas Borge to move in and dismantle the National Guard, eventually setting himself up as one of the mainstays of the new popular army. On 19 July, the guerrillas occupied the capital, Managua, with the next day witnessing the arrival of the provisional junta.

Although the Carter Administration had earlier implied a fear of the provisional junta through its aborted proposal for a countervailing junta of more moderate elements, upon the junta's official ascendance to power the US began to praise its "moderate" composition. The junta presided over a State Council of 33 representatives and an 18-member Cabinet. Both were presumably composed mostly of moderates, a notable exception being Thomas Borge as Minister of the Interior in the Cabinet.

**W**e noted earlier the widespread communist belief that a geopolitical transformation of Central America is imminent and that the transformation will change the correlation of forces throughout Latin America. We also noted that Borge's

positions in the Sandinista government constitute one of the power bases from which such a geopolitical transformation could be launched. Although in late August Borge settled for third in the military hierarchy, he retained his other positions as Minister of the Interior and head of the police. Furthermore, the individuals rising to numbers one and two in the military, Humberto Ortega and Luis Carrión, were, like Borge, members of the Sandinistas. According to the often-quoted US intelligence report of 2 May 1979, close covert contacts between the Sandinistas and Castro's Cuba were established.<sup>52</sup>

The question at this point centers on the future direction of revolutionary forces in the Caribbean and Central America. Further armed conflict in Central America and elsewhere cannot be ruled out. Toward that contingency, Panama and Cuba are helping to reorganize the Sandinista popular army and police. At the same time, there seems open the option of revolutionary moderation, with social and economic transformation coming through political rather than military means.

On one thing the revolutionary movement seems united at present: it does not want to engage the US in a direct military confrontation. The US has also shown its reluctance to employ military force against the Sandinistas. On 14 December 1978, Assistant Secretary of State Viron Vaky stated flatly, "Today the use of US military power to intervene in the internal affairs of another American republic is unthinkable."<sup>53</sup> Thus the most feasible option for the US under current circumstances is to pursue a policy of conciliation, though not only with the revolutionary coalition. It should also restore good relations with its traditional allies, now largely estranged, including the proffering of military aid and advice. Otherwise, as this analysis of the Nicaraguan crisis has shown, the United States will be condemned to pursue a course of unilateralism, with all the dangers of frustration and defeat that such a course implies.

As the 1980's begin, it is apparent that the influx of Cuban teachers, doctors, and construction workers into Nicaragua and

elsewhere, in conjunction with their military and police advisors, reflects a Castro strategy to capture the "hearts and minds" of Latin Americans. It would seem imperative for the US to do likewise, dropping the current policy of giving economic aid to Nicaragua and other Latin American countries with no strings attached, but rather supplementing traditional aid with civic action programs. By combining military and economic aid with education, medical, and other services geared to the molding of democratic values, the US can better meet the challenge of Castroism in the 1980's.

#### NOTES

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